

1953

Otho Grayson Bell

Bern Keating

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Enclosed are clippings from the Scott County Times, published in Forest, Miss., by Erle Johnston, who is doing the legwork for BAGEANT. The clippings give a history of the case to this point.

Now let me give you my reactions and the results of my investigation for your guidance.

To answer the big question first. Why did he do it?

He did it because all his life he has been almost psychopathically dependent on his father for guidance. His father is by no means a brutal or harsh father, quite the contrary, but he is a Mississippi farm patriarch of the old school and when he says to one of his boys to go pick the cotton in the south field he doesn't consider this the opening gambit of a debate. He expects to hear the boy say "Yes, daddy" and GO PICK COTTON.

This boy has always been the most docile and tractable of all his children, and his docility has been mentioned by everybody who knew him well and discussed him with me.

I got the definite impression that he needs firm guidance very badly and when he got into the Army he got it from his sergeant. A visiting prisoner of war from Grenada, Miss., who was in the same compound and later released called on the parents to say that

during the early brain-washing period the commies concentrated on the privates who then came to their sergeants for advice. When the commies found this out, they separated the ratings and then redoubled their efforts on the isolated lower ratings. The father agrees with me that Otho would not have stayed behind if he could have had an older firmer American leader such as his sergeant to act as a father-advisor to him and hold him steady. But when he was isolated, he didn't have the experience in making decisions and standing firm to help him resist. And when the commies offered cigarettes and friendship and acted as father-substitutes, he felt no strength to resist. He felt more comfortable being told what to do. His father agrees with this analysis and adds, "If I could get into that explaining tent, I'd just say to Otho 'son, march out that door yonder and go home,' and he'd say 'Yes, Daddy,' and march.

Community reaction, as nearly as I could tell, was 100 percent favorable to receiving him home with friendliness if he decides to come back. Travis Chambers, commandant of the American Legion post, says he will be welcomed as a member of his organization like any other front-line combat soldier. But the big point that must be emphasized here is that the community and his family do not truly believe that Otho has flatly and irrevocably declared himself communist. When they are convinced of this fact, their attitude will change sharply. Right now they want him to come home.

How the commies can feed him the story about no opportunity for the working man here, I don't know. Otho helped his father pick many a pound of cotton as a sharecropper with nothing in the world to call his own just fourteen years ago. Today he owns 160 acres of beautiful light loam mixed woodland, pasture and rowcrops, he raises _____ chickens for the market, keeps 23 beautiful cows and a white-faced bull, a half dozen or so thorobred hogs. He has a new chevrolet, new shotguns and rifles, new tractor and about 1500 dollars worth of new accessories for it, a new bathroom, some new acres of land including a pear orchard set aside as a home site for Ortho himself when he comes home. He raised 1½ bales to the acre of cotton and between 45 and 55 bushels of corn to the acre, both splendid yields. He raises a garden that keeps the whole family in a wide variety of vegetables year-around.

While he is not a religious man particularly, Mr. Bell keeps repeating "Old Marsta's been pretty good to me in all other things. I believe He's going to be good to me in Korea too."

Mr. Bell is a forthright vigorous man of spare build. He habitually goes barefoot in and out of the house, though his children do not. He rarely smokes, but he does dip snuff constantly. He is a crack rifle shot and reputedly can light the tips of matches with a bullet from ten paces. (I doubt the hell out of this, but that's what they say.)

Mrs. Bell is the boy's stepmother, but his proper mother died in bearing him, and the present Mrs. Bell is the only mother he has ever known. She is a fine countrywoman who keeps a spotless house. The decor is typical country Mississippi, with a heavy dependence on cheap family photographs. The interiors tend to be a little bare by other standards, and this emphasizes the cleanliness of the interior. The road passing in front of the house is dust, and with the current drouth there are great clouds drifting across the house every time a car goes by. Nevertheless the house is shiny clean.

There are pictures here of the larder jammed with canned fruits and vegetables. She works very hard on the problem of proper and sufficient food for the children and it is a healthy looking brood.

A curious thing about the letters they have received from him. Those in his own handwriting didn't sound at all like him. They used language he doesn't have enough education to use, the syntax just wasn't Mississippi, and the whole flavor was stilted and foreign. Typical dialectical materialism language. Then the one letter they got written in another hand, supposedly because he burnt his hand frying potatoes, sounds like Otho speaking. Same cast of phrase and vocabulary.

The family lives in Hillsboro, which is not really a town, but just a general store and gin nine miles north of Forest.

The only two big shots to come from Forest

There is no question in anyone's mind a Hillsboro

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are the present Senator James Eastland and former Governor Paul Johnson.

The man to call in Forest to answer all questions is Erle Johnston, editor of the Scott County Times.

OK
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